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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000771

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN  
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA  
PARIS FOR JMILLER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [SA](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: CHRISTIAN MINISTERS REJECT SAUDI  
INVOLVEMENT, ACCEPT IT WILL TAKE TIME TO FORM CABINET

REF: A. BEIRUT 768

[B](#). BEIRUT 764

[C](#). BEIRUT 746

[D](#). BEIRUT 263

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar and Information Minister Tarek Mitri, in separate meetings with the Ambassador on July 9, criticized the Saudis for involving the Syrians in the Lebanese political process. Mitri said he believed the Saudis realized they made a mistake and that they would stop pressuring Lebanon to participate in their reconciliation efforts with Syria. Both Najjar and Mitri expected it would take some time to form a cabinet, and that this was preferable to a quick resolution which could trigger violence in the streets. Asserting that Hizballah and the Syrians were stalling the formation, they discussed the possible guarantees Hizballah and the Syrians would look for in order to allow the formation to proceed.

[2](#). (C) Throughout the week, PM-designate Saad Hariri was busy quietly consulting with various opposition groups and no agreement for splitting the seats had been reached. Meanwhile, there have been discussions among a few March 14 Christian members to form an independent Christian coalition to counter the larger Christian parties. End summary.

SAUDIS MADE A BIG MISTAKE,  
BUT IT'S OVER NOW  
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[3](#). (C) On July 9, the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar and Information Minister Tarek Mitri -- both pro-March 14 Christians -- at their respective ministries. In line with what several political figures have been saying (Ref B), both ministers criticized the Saudis for involving the Syrians in the Lebanese political process (Ref C). Najjar accused the Saudis of empowering the Syrians and insisted, "We won the elections, but the Syrians are acting as if they are the victors."

14. (C) It would be very difficult for both the Sunnis and the Christians to understand and accept Lebanese rapprochement, and specifically a trip by PM-designate Saad Hariri to Syria, before or immediately after cabinet formation, Najjar said. Playing off of a popular campaign billboard during the elections, he joked that the Saudis should "Be beautiful and shut up," -- send money to Beirut but not meddle in the politics.

15. (C) According to Mitri, the Saudis erred by not clarifying to the Syrians what they could expect to receive in exchange for a smooth premiership for Hariri, which he believed was the Saudis' ultimate intention. He said it quickly became clear that the Syrians were not prepared to concede anything, such as demarcating the border with Lebanon. Mitri believed the Saudis would stop pressuring Lebanon to participate, but would continue to pursue its own reconciliation with Syria.

FORMING A CABINET WILL,  
AND SHOULD, TAKE TIME  
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16. (C) Recounting his conversation with President Sleiman the previous day, Najjar said that President Sleiman is "not anxious to quickly form a new government." President Sleiman reportedly warned, "If we move too fast, there would be fighting in the streets." (Note: According to Najjar, however, President Sleiman telephoned President Asad to discuss government formation following Commanding General of U.S. Central Command David Petraeus' June 30 trip to Beirut, during which he said he hoped for a quick cabinet formation.

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End note.)

17. (C) If guarantees were made to Syria and Hizballah, Najjar predicted, then the door would be open to forming the cabinet. He discounted any leniency for Syria by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) as one such guarantee because the STL is "out of Lebanese hands." He supposed that guarantees could include a blocking third in the cabinet, the appointment of a minister who has good relations with Syria, a visit from Hariri to Damascus, or guarantees not to address Hizballah's weapons.

18. (C) Acknowledging that President Sleiman was hoping to expand his powers in part through naming five or six ministers (compared to the three he named in the current cabinet), Najjar assessed that the Sunnis would not accept a president more powerful than the prime minister. He further stated, "The Christians do not have the solution in their hands -- it rests with the Muslims."

19. (C) In the meantime, Najjar said, everyone fears Hizballah, even Speaker Nabih Berri (who he said would not stray from his alliance with Hizballah) and Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Jean Kahwagi. All it takes is one Hizballah minister to derail government initiatives, Najjar complained, and the instant he agrees to something, everything moves forward immediately. (Note: Najjar was referring to Labor Minister Mohammed Fneish, Hizballah's sole minister, who turned off Najjar's attempts to sign an MOU with the STL with a mere, "Let us study this further" statement, Ref D. End note.)

110. (C) Expecting the cabinet formation process to continue for a few more weeks, Mitri was unconcerned if the cabinet was not formed immediately. Mitri noted that Hariri has kept his cards close to his chest during the ongoing consultation process, which he determined was a good approach. He noted that Hariri has been in listening mode with the various opposition groups, some of which are making "impossible" demands, referring to Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's request for proportional representation in cabinet that mirrors what his bloc holds in parliament.

¶11. (C) Hizballah is not insisting on a blocking third, instead asking for a "blocking third or its equivalent," and wants to be a part of the cabinet, Mitri surmised. Attempting to define "its equivalent," Mitri suggested it could refer to commitments from President Sleiman to refrain from putting controversial issues to vote, such as Hizballah's arms, foreign policy issues, or Lebanese participation in Middle East peace. He expected the next ministerial statement to resemble the statement issued in July 2008.

¶12. (C) In a separate July 9 meeting, President Sleiman's aide General Hannaoui said that President Sleiman was not opposed to giving the opposition the blocking third, but that he did not expect March 14 to accept this formula. Hannaoui said a 10-5-15 split (10 for the opposition, 5 for the President, and 15 for March 14) was "ideal," but that Hariri was opposed.

¶13. (C) Hannoui added that President Sleiman refused the proposal whereby two out of five ministers allocated to the President would be one individual close to March 14, and one close to March 8. According to Hannoui, March 8 opposes Defense Minister Elias Murr staying on in his position. Mitri said he believed President Sleiman would keep both Murr and Interior Minister Ziad Baroud in their positions. (Note: It is unclear whether Baroud would choose to remain, if asked, Ref A. End note.)

SLEIMAN SERIOUS ABOUT  
NATIONAL DIALOGUE  
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¶14. (C) Minister Mitri relayed that President Sleiman is keen on heading the National Dialogue and will continue to hold sessions once the cabinet is formed. He said that the President tasked experts to identify ways to move the National Dialogue process along. If Hizballah sought commitments from President Sleiman to keep controversial issues out of the cabinet, Mitri proposed that the National Dialogue would become the venue for these issues, but Hizballah could still have a veto power.

FRENCH PROMISES TO SYRIA...  
SUSPICION OF QATARI BEHAVIOR  
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¶15. (C) Minister Najjar was wary of Qatari support for Syria at the expense of Lebanon, saying that the Qataris pay money directly to Syrian President Bashar Asad and his family. Both Najjar and Mitri wondered what the French were working on with the Syrians and the Qataris believing the French promised Syria and Qatar something before the parliamentary elections in exchange for stability in Lebanon.

LEBANON SHOULD BE A  
SECURITY COUNCIL MEMBER  
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¶16. (C) Without knowing who the next Foreign Minister will be, Mitri said there could be challenges within the GOL should it become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2010. However, he said, Lebanon could not withdraw its candidacy now because that would be "tantamount to being a failed state." He explained that Lebanon's voting decisions in the Security Council do not require cabinet approval, but Hizballah could (and would) find a way to impose its will on how Lebanon votes. (Note: Mitri referenced the harsh criticism targeting him by the opposition when he attended the Annapolis conference in 2007 as Acting FM, despite the resignation of FM and the absence of any cabinet approval requirement for his attendance. End note.)

## INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN COALITION?

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¶17. (C) MP Dory Chamoun told us July 8 that several independent figures, including MP Boutros Harb and head of National Bloc party Carlos Edde approached him to form an "independent Christian" coalition. Chamoun said that Harb and the others felt threatened by larger Christian parties, namely Lebanese Forces, Kataeb, and Free Patriotic Movement, and are seeking to create a coalition to ensure their survival.

¶18. (C) Mitri also told us that he expected some shifting alliances, but not until the cabinet was formed. He attributed some realignment among the blocs because of the National Dialogue, as participation hinges on the size of the parliamentary bloc.  
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